

Western Australia: Pastoral Industry

Senator SMITH (Western Australia-Deputy Government Whip in the Senate) (21:50): As a regional senator for Western Australia, I am especially aware of the importance of the pastoral industry to the Western Australian economy, which is why I rise this evening to address what is the key economic issue in northern Western Australia, and that is: the introduction of rangelands reform by the Department of Lands within the Western Australian state government. There are proposals for reform now under very active consideration, and, if the matter is not handled sensitively, there is the potential to devastate pastoral communities in parts of regional Western Australia.

While the pastoral estate only covers 35 per cent of the Western Australian rangelands, it is this 35 per cent that contains the major-and, in many cases, the only-economic activity in the rangelands. That economic activity, of course, is livestock grazing. It is an activity that has occurred throughout Western Australia for generations, from the cattle stations in the Kimberley and the Pilbara to the sheep and goat stations in the Gascoyne-Murchison and the Goldfields.

Taken together, we are talking about an industry that employs over 10,000 northern Western Australians, including pastoral families, Indigenous landowners, exporters, stockmen, road transport providers and dockside workers, and others who provide services to the trade, such as veterinarians and fodder suppliers. Over time, it is also an activity that has diversified into subsidiary undertakings: 10 per cent of the Kimberley pastoral leases have tourism operations entwined in their day-to-day activities, while 61 per cent of Pilbara properties have mining activities occurring on their lease. Other enterprises and operations occurring on pastoral leases include horticulture and beekeeping, traditional activities undertaken by Aboriginal communities, helicopter mustering businesses, Indigenous training centres, mining accommodation, contracting and steel fabrication works.

This is why protecting the long-term interests of the pastoral industry is paramount. We are talking about something far broader than the issue of a few head of cattle grazing.

So I was concerned to read recently that the proposed reforms to the WA Land Administration Act, the legislation which governs the Western Australian pastoral industry, have met with great criticism from within the industry in Western Australia. This includes industry leaders such as Paul Holmes a Court, who's Heytesbury Cattle Co. runs about 160,000 cattle across six stations, covering 2½ million hectares in the Northern Territory and east Kimberley. Indeed, Mr Holmes a Court has said that the so-called reforms put forward by WA Nationals lands minister Terry Redman were 'more of a threat to the industry than a comfort'. He went on to say:

I have the experience of having pastoral leases that are either side of the WA/NT border.

They join each other, they are exactly the same land type, exactly the same climate, the same sort of cattle, sold to the same market, but it is like operating in two different countries.

The northern cattle industry goes right across the whole country and if they- meaning the Western Australian state government-want to be part of what is going on with the development of the north, they have to be looking to the NT and Queensland to see how it is done.

However, Mr Holmes a Court's most blistering criticism has been directed at the move by Minister Terry Redman to remove the Pastoral Lands Board, the statutory body that administers the terms and conditions of pastoral leases. The proposal as it stands is to replace it with a rangelands advisory council that will include conservationists and other interest groups who, in many cases, are zealously opposed to livestock grazing and intensive irrigation. Perhaps worst of all, it is further proposed to have all of the Pastoral Land Board's legislative powers reside with the minister of the day. Mr Holmes a Court has something to say about that. He went on to say it is 'highly inappropriate to put such important matters effectively in the hands of one person' and has also warned that such a poor governance structure will create 'a great disincentive to invest here as opposed to elsewhere'. When one considers the stance of both federal and WA state Labor towards the mainstay of the pastoral industry, live cattle and sheep exports-an industry that former Prime Minister Julia Gillard happily threw into turmoil by suspending live cattle exports to Indonesia on the basis of an ABC *Four Corners* program-Mr Holmes a Court's concerns are entirely reasonable and the alarm he is raising deserves great attention. As the live export ban showed, if all the power resides in one place, whole industries can be shut down on a whim. What the pastoral industry needs are more safeguards.

The concerns Mr Holmes a Court expresses have been echoed by others. Seven West Media chairman Kerry Stokes and his family's company, Australian Capital Equity, are arguing for reforms that will support the pastoral industry. According to media reports, this is their view:

In a submission to the Department of Lands, ACE- Australian Capital Equity- chairman Ryan Stokes said a statutory body with powers similar to the PLB- Pastoral Lands Board- should be retained and that at least half of its members should be pastoralists or people with pastoral experience.

Australian Capital Equity, which owns Napier Downs in the Kimberley, called for the maximum lease holding in WA to also be increased. It also recommended giving pastoralists the right to convert pastoral leases to freehold and to perpetual transferable leases. Another prominent Australian, Mrs Gina Rinehart-

Senator Sterle interjecting-

Senator SMITH: Senator Sterle, someone who prides himself on representing the far north of Western Australia, is laughing at the very people who bring economic development, jobs-

Senator Sterle: They donate to you!

The ACTING DEPUTY PRESIDENT (Senator Bernardi): Senator Sterle, order!

Senator SMITH: Another prominent Australian, Gina Rinehart, who owns Mulga Downs, Nerrima and Fossil Downs stations, has already signalled she will support the industry in its campaign against some of the changes proposed by the WA Nationals' Mr Redman. In an article in *The West Australian* on 23 March, Mrs Rinehart stated:

The pastoral industry is very valuable and contributes greatly to the wealth-
of all Australians, even Labor voters who might be inclined to vote for Labor Senator Glenn Sterle. I added that; that was not in the quote. I continue:

We would not want to see anything introduced that would reduce the ability to graze livestock.

For someone from the Transport Workers Union, I find it surprising that you would be scoffing at a contribution tonight about the livestock industry.

Senator Sterle: I'm scoffing at you with your blue with the Nationals.

The ACTING DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Address your comments through the chair, Senator Smith.

Senator SMITH: I should hasten to add that, although the people I have just mentioned are prominent names in the WA pastoral community, the concerns they express are being echoed by many other pastoralists. Echoing Mrs Rinehart's comments is another pastoral industry leader, Jack Burton, who owns Yeeda Station and is soon to open the first new abattoir in the Kimberley since the 1990s.

Senator Sterle: Good on Jack Burton. Good on him.

Senator SMITH: I echo your sentiments. Good on Jack Burton for doing what people said could not be done.

The ACTING DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Order! Senators on my left, cease interjecting.

Senator SMITH: Mr Burton has also warned that giving the ultimate power in disputes over stocking density and other matters to the lands minister carries enormous risk. As we know, nothing stays the same in politics. Governments and ministers change. If, for example, a Western Australian Labor government came to power- heaven forbid, Senator Sterle- that was ideologically hostile to pastoralists' activity, it would spell doom for pastoralists. With all the final decision-making power concentrated in the hands of one minister, they would have nowhere to turn. It is entirely reasonable for Western Australian pastoralists to be sceptical of any proposed rangelands reform package. History has shown that the interests of pastoralists are frequently given less weight by government departments and bureaucrats than they probably deserve.

Equally legitimate are the concerns over which aspect of these proposed changes will trigger future-act provisions under the Native Title Act, leading to increased costs for pastoral lease respondents in native title determinations and destroying much of the goodwill that has been built by both parties in resolving this complex issue. No-one is suggesting that the rangelands reform process is simple; nor is anyone suggesting that the proposed legislative changes should permit pastoral leaseholders exemptions from native title or compliance with environmental regulation. There are some elements within this reform package that can provide tangible benefits for the pastoral industry and they should be supported. In fact, many of the proposed amendments under these current reforms may provide a better security of tenure and increased diversification options for pastoral leaseholders.

Senator Sterle: I'm with you, mate.

Senator SMITH: Senator Sterle is with me now.

The ACTING DEPUTY PRESIDENT: Ignore the interjections, Senator Smith-

Senator SMITH: What a convincing speech I have been giving. Thank you, Senator Sterle.

The ACTING DEPUTY PRESIDENT: and address your comments to the chair. Order, Senator Sterle!

Senator SMITH: However, it is becoming increasingly evident that the consultation process on these reforms has been hijacked by conservation organisations, groups like the Pew Charitable Trusts group, who are more concerned with turning the WA's bushland and outback into a giant carbon farm and nature reserve rather than supporting a vibrant pastoral industry that provides jobs and opportunity for pastoral families and remote communities now and into the future.

Ultimately, their vision is one where taxpayers fund land stewardship programs in the outback rather than encouraging enterprise. We have seen in other parts of Australia the economic folly of locking up productive land in the name of conservation, without pausing to consider what that might actually mean for the economic viability of regional communities themselves.